COMMITTEE ON GOVERNMENT REFORM

TOM DAVIS, CHAIRMAN

N E W S   R E L E A S E

Davis Statement on GAO Katrina Report

WASHINGTON, D.C. – Government Reform Committee Chairman Tom Davis (R-VA) released the following statement today on Government Accountability Office report 06-618, *"Catastrophic Disasters: Enhanced Leadership, Capabilities, and Accountability Controls will Improve the Nation's Preparedness, Response, and Recovery System":*

"The Government Accountability Office's report on catastrophic disasters makes a number of recommendations that the Department of Homeland Security appears to be in the process of implementing. These recommendations address many of the concerns raised in the report from the House Bipartisan Committee to Investigate the Preparation for and Response to Katrina, which I chaired.

"For example, GAO found that confusion about roles and responsibilities under the National Response Plan contributed to problems with the response. GAO reports that DHS has revised the National Response Plan to make clear the legal authorities and the chain of command in declaring a disaster an Incident of National Significance and activating the Catastrophic Incident Annex.

"The GAO also found that certain capabilities in situational awareness and assessment, emergency communications, evacuation, search and rescue, logistics, and mass care and sheltering require effective planning and coordination. According to DHS's response to the GAO report, DHS has prepared a draft 'National Exercise Program' to ensure adequate planning and coordination of emergency response. DHS has also conducted training and held exercises to improve preparedness and response. These are very positive developments.

"Also in keeping with the Select Committee, GAO recognizes the need for greater capacity for contracting in a disaster. First responders and victims need, among other things, food, water, shelter, transportation, and communications capabilities. The federal, state, and local governments need to have the capability through advance contracting to acquire needed goods and services. Such capabilities will speed relief to victims and be

more cost effective for the government. According to DHS, such a capability is being developed.

"In other words, the good news in this summary GAO report is that the DHS/FEMA learning curve is not flat. They've begun to scale the steep mountain of problems identified by the Katrina Select Committee. The report also contains clear examples of federal agencies stepping up to the plate. Even when lines of authority may have been obscure or decision making muddled, agencies pushed through those barriers to move resources forward to the disaster sites.

"There are valuable lessons here. Plans need to be exercised before the disaster hits. The inevitable tension between speed and efficiency can be managed with the right oversight tools in place. Aid can flow quickly. Contracts can be activated on short notice. But those steps have to be taken openly, transparently and with full accountability. Military capabilities for reconnaissance and communications need to be more fully integrated into civilian response scenarios. And DHS needs to maintain a clear-eyed assessment of state and local capabilities. Not every disaster is the same, nor is every state or city equally prepared to cope with catastrophic events. This report reinforces congressional findings that the federal response needs to be nimble, scalable, and decisive.

"While reports like this often focus on the negative, GAO pays tribute to the heroic efforts of the thousands who worked tirelessly to help victims. These include the Coast Guard, the National Guard, local first responders and hospital workers, and charitable and private sector organizations. Such praise is well deserved. And those who work so hard to support victims of disaster deserve the best possible support from their leaders. This GAO report helps show the way to improving disaster preparedness and response."

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